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SUBJECT: OMANIS SPEAK OUT ON U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

Classified By: Ambassador Gary A. Grappo for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) In attempt to get an unvarnished view of U.S. foreign policy from well-educated Omanis, who are normally reluctant to openly share their opinions on political topics, the Ambassador convened on November 6 the first of a planned series of small-scale discussion groups. Entitled "First Tuesday" (in reference to the timing of this and future such discussions on the first Tuesday of the month), the Ambassador welcomed 10 Omani guests to his residence for the event and primed the discussion with an opening question on what aspect of U.S. foreign policy most concerned Omanis. Recognizing that the presence of government officials could hinder conversation, all Omani invitees were from the private sector. (Note: Although not part of the government, one member of the royal family -- an entrepreneurial, Eton-educated distant cousin of the Sultan -- was in attendance. While his presence did not appear to diminish the candidness of the conversation, it could have been a constraining influence on possible comments concerning domestic matters. End Note.)

¶2. (C) From the start, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict predictably took center stage in the discussion. Emphasizing how this conflict contributed to extremist ideology and was connected to other regional problems, the Omani guests asserted that achieving a Middle East peace deal should be a top U.S. priority. Several participants claimed, however, -- with no Omani in the room arguing otherwise -- that U.S. policy on this subject was decidedly biased in favor of Israel and discounted the legitimate needs of the Palestinian people. Without U.S. pressure on Israel, they contended, efforts to resolve the conflict would fail.

¶3. (C) In discussing the Israeli-Palestinian situation, some of the guests brought up their perceptions of the strength of the Israeli lobby in Washington. Rather than criticize Israel for its active engagement within the U.S., however, several acknowledged that Arab countries did a poor job in reaching out to the American people and U.S. media, and could learn a lesson from the Israelis in seeking U.S. public support for their positions and policies.

¶4. (C) In addition to Middle East peace, guests criticized the U.S. for its invasion of Iraq and its subsequent handling of the situation there. One participant acknowledged that he was initially glad to see Saddam Hussein removed from power, but added that the resulting instability and violence in Iraq later made him change his mind. While Iran was not a central focus of the conversation, it nevertheless evoked strong emotion. One Omani declared that mounting U.S.-Iran tensions "directly affect us" and strongly denounced the possibility of a U.S. strike against Iran. Another argued pointedly that reports of possible U.S. actions against Iran reinforce the growing Arab perception of the U.S. as a "bully," forcing its way on those who disagree with American policies as opposed to seeking dialogue and compromise.

15. (C) Several discussion participants pointed out that in criticizing U.S. policies, they drew a distinction between the American people -- whom they generally admired -- and the U.S. administration. One Omani, however, dissented, commenting soberly and with real regret that U.S. voters were responsible for electing governments that were allegedly pursuing harmful policies in the region. The American public, accordingly, was "part of the problem."

16. (C) In responding to a final question from the Ambassador on U.S. efforts to promote democracy in the region, the Omani guests agreed that Arab nations should not be expected to adopt a U.S.-style government system. A few questioned what the term "democracy" really means, particularly in an Arab context. In a surprising show of frankness, one Omani asserted, "There is only one real democracy in the region -- Israel." He added that he used to think that Oman was ready to institute significant democratic reforms, but now believed that the country was not yet prepared for such changes. Nevertheless, no one wanted the U.S. to stop promoting democracy in the Middle East. More patience and tolerance on the part of the U.S. might actually better serve the cause of democracy in the region, several suggested.

17. (C) Comment: The discussion at the Ambassador's residence elicited almost unprecedented frankness from the participants on their personal views of American foreign policy. While the guests, in typical Omani demeanor, tried to remain dispassionate, it was clear that they held strongly felt opinions critical of the U.S. that belied the usual pleasantries encountered in conversations about the United States. Equally clear was their appreciation for the event and the genuine opportunity it gave them to speak openly -- and us to listen. The Ambassador plans to continue these discussion groups with a variety of private Omanis to better

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gauge local feelings towards selected subjects. End Comment.

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